The Fourth Church Pulpit

CONTENDING WITH GOD

November 13, 1994

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Mark 13:1-8, Job 21:2-16, 23:1-7

"Why do the wicked live on ...? Today ... my compliant is bitter: ..."
Job 21:7, 23:2 (NRSV)

Have you ever argued with God? Have your prayers ever had a sharp edge, a little sting to them? Have you talked back to God, demanded that God pay attention? Have you ever been angry with God? In one sense those sound like very presumptuous, perhaps theologically arrogant suggestions. My first and quick response, if the preacher asked me that sequence of questions, would be to stiffen a bit and become defensive and deny all. Argue with God? Angry with God? Of course not! That's ridiculous.

And yet, if you can answer affirmatively: "Yes, there was a time when I argued with God, or very much wanted to, and yes, I was angry with God," you are in good company. In fact, my suggestion is that even though we may have trouble acknowledging it, even to ourselves, many of us have contended with God and may indeed be engaged in an angry contention with God at this very moment. And that those of us whose instinct is to deny that we have ever even thought about being angry with God, are either not being honest or else have engaged in a life-long process of denial and emotional self-manipulation which will simply not allow us to be angry and argue with God, out of a sense of appropriateness or fear. Or worse yet, our definition of faith has no room for anger or doubt — negativity of any kind, perhaps even passion of any kind.

Job got angry and argued with God. Do you know the story of Job? It is one of the most provocative and enduring works of literature in all of history. It is a compelling short story and it is very elegant poetry. It was written in the sixth century, B.C.E., while the Hebrew people were in exile in Babylon. That is to say, it was written at the moment in time when they, all of them, from their priests and poets, to ordinary men and women, struggling to survive, were asking, "Why has this happened? What did we do to deserve this? How can we continue to trust God in this situation?" It deals with issues as relevant as last week and questions we will find ourselves asking as we read the newspaper this morning.

Job is a good man. He is comfortable, secure, owns a big estate and a lot of livestock. He loves his wife and together they, in middle age, are enjoying their ten wonderful children who themselves enjoy being Job's family and eat and drink in one another's homes regularly. It is a picture of perfect happiness. In a culture which was absolutely certain that God blesses the righteous with wealth and big healthy families and punishes the wicked, Job is a symbol of all that is good. Best of all, he is appropriately grateful and faithful in his religious responsibilities. This man is so good he even does extra religious duty, puts a little extra in the plate, for his children who have not quite arrived at the age of mature religious responsibility but soon will, he hopes and prays. This is a good and great man.

In the meantime the poet is setting the scene for another drama. God and Satan are discussing the peculiar phenomenon of human faithfulness, the apparent human capacity to believe in God; perhaps even the yearning to believe, the need to trust ...

"Consider Job, a good and faithful man," God says with considerable pride.

"Big deal," Satan replies. "Of course he's good and faithful. You've blessed him with all those sheep and cattle, all those fat healthy babies. No wonder he believes in God. Take it all away. Make him suffer. Let's see what happens then."

And so it is that one day Job's perfect life disintegrates.

His livestock and employees are all killed. His children die in a windstorm. All is lost. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked shall I return. The Lord gave. The Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Job breaks out in offensive sores, a sign in his culture of uncleanness, impurity, sin. The poet draws a picture of utter despair ... a once proud and comfortable and good man, sitting on a heap of ashes, scratching his sores with a piece of broken pottery. Finally his faithful wife turns on him: "Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die!"

At one level it is a story of a man who wants to believe in God so much that he persists in the face of the very situation which seems to deny the very notion of God. It is, that is to say, a serious reflection on the human longing for a God to believe in and trust, and a profound suggestion that that longing is the evidence of God's presence in our lives ... Job trusts God, will not let God go. Job expresses the deepest human yearning, the need – I believe – for God.

And at another level, Job relentlessly deals with the fundamental human question: the question of innocent suffering. Why does it happen? Many thoughtful and deeply faithful people have asked the question, not in the abstract, but in the midst of their own desperate pain. We read what they write with grateful respect. When Martin Marty was experiencing personal grief, he turned to the resources of our faith, particularly the Psalter, and then wrote down his reflections in a wonderful book, *A Cry of Absence.*

> "Whoever says God" Marty wrote, "has chosen to imply goodness and power. If there is goodness and power why is there death or pain or suffering ...?" [p. 53]

And Nicholas Wolterstorff, who teaches at Yale, and was formerly on the faculty of Calvin College, wrote about his response to the death of a son in a mountain climbing accident:

> "I cannot fit it all together ... To the most agonized question I ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess ... I can only, with Job, endure." [*Lament for a Son*, p. 67/68]

It is and has always been the fundamental human question — why do the innocent suffer? Archibald MacLeish, American poet, playwright, wrote a contemporary version of Job, *JB*, which was a highly acclaimed Broadway hit in the 1950s and won a Pulitzer Prize. In the play, the parts of God and Satan, whose discussion of human faithfulness precipitates all of Job's problems, are played by two aging circus vendors, Mr. Zuss and Nickles. JB is a comfortable, secure, decent businessman with a loving family and faithful wife. As the two protagonists set the scene for the drama, posing the question of whether human trust in God can survive suffering and tragedy, Mr. Zuss says –

> "Oh, there's always someone playing Job."

Nickles responds:

> "There must be
> Thousands! ...
> Millions and millions of mankind
> Burned, crushed, broken, mutilated
> Slaughtered, and for what? For thinking!
> For walking around the world in the wrong
> Skin, the wrong shaped noses — eyelids:
> Sleeping the wrong night, wrong city —
> London, Dresden, Hiroshima."

Of course we ask the question, not so much in the abstract, but when we confront innocent suffering: the heart-breaking drowning of two babies, an airplane crash, or more personally when someone we know and love becomes critically ill.

Robert McAfee Brown is one of our distinguished and prominent Presbyterian theologians. He works in retirement now after teaching at Union Seminary and Stanford. Recently his newborn granddaughter was fighting for her life in the hospital with a critical kidney disease. Brown wrote her a beautiful letter which the *Christian Century* subsequently published:

> "Dear MacKenzie" he wrote, "In your young life you have already accomplished a lot. You have widened the circle of love. Your mother's junior students have donated blood. One even volunteered his kidney ... There are things we will never understand, but within which we live. Here is one: what has happened to you is bad, and yet good has come of it. Instead of making us bitter, suffering can make us tender, and help us to focus on others who are going through comparable experiences."
>
> The critically ill baby was a reminder, Brown reflects, that time is so very precarious. "I hope that we will never forget what we learned in the pediatric ward: the sheer wonder of a single day in which you, MacKenzie, and those we love, and others elsewhere, are doing nothing more spectacular than breathing regularly."

I recently heard a remarkable speech Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor made to a group of women — survivors of cancer. Justice O'Connor was candid, straight forward, business-like, and eloquent as she shared her own experience: the fear, the technical complexity, the frustration at having to deal with six different doctors, each saying something different, ... and the vulnerability and powerlessness. At the end as she was talking about what she learned, she echoed Bob Brown – the precious gift of every day; the way a close call, a reminder of our mortality, is a gift because it punctuates the grace of life, the undeserved, unmerited, unearned miracle that we are here, today, each of us, breathing regularly, functioning, sitting together in this blessed community ...

Professor Brown's conclusion of his letter to MacKenzie dealt with the basic issue.

> "If you live, I will give God thanks," he wrote. "If you do not I will be asking 'Why does all this happen to a tiny newborn baby?' I know that there is one answer that does not tempt me: the pious statement that 'whatever happens is God's will and we must accept it.' It is not God's will that you or any of God's children should die in infancy. It is God's will that you live joyously and fully."

And then Brown sounds like Job.

> "If you die" he writes to little MacKenzie, "we will not be acquiescent and meekly accepting." [*The Christian Century*, 3/2/94, p. 227]

Job is not acquiescent. He does not meekly accept what has happened to him. In fact, he is deeply angry.

Three friends come to visit Job in his misery and try to comfort him. They say the kinds of things we are tempted to say to one another in similar circumstances: "It was God's will. You have to accept the bad with the good." Job's friends repeat the conventional wisdom of their culture. God sends suffering to punish wickedness. Job needs to identify his sin, confess his guilt and God will forgive and restore.

Job will have none of it. He's innocent and knows it. He has done nothing to deserve what has happened. He holds on to his confidence in God, that what has transpired cannot be God's doing. God's will. And he starts to get angry ... Angry with his friends for trivializing his suffering, angry at the unfairness of it all, and finally, angry with God.

Norman Habel, an Australian scholar, in his commentary on Job, recalls the day his home burned to the ground.

> "It was the day before Christmas and in the dry heat of the Australian summer the wooden farmhouse was consumed like tinder. As we watched the blaze people came from everywhere. A pastor, too came. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Norm, the Lord gives and the Lord takes away.' I was angry. I wanted to hit him. There was no comfort in his words at that moment." [Job, p. 42]

Similarly, William Sloane Coffin remembers sitting in the Yale Chapel during a funeral for a friend who was killed in an automobile accident. The minister processed down the aisle intoning, unctuously, Job's word: "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Coffin says it made him so angry he wanted to stick his foot into the aisle and trip him.

Job becomes angry. The 21st chapter, from which we heard several verses, is a lengthy, angry, explosion on the topic of life's unfairness. Conventional wisdom is wrong. Good people are not rewarded and bad people punished. Sometimes the opposite happens. The wicked prosper. He presents a bill of particulars:

- The wicked enjoy power and prosperity
- The wicked flaunt God and survive

"Life isn't fair" Job complains bitterly, finally finding the courage to bring his case to God ...

> "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, ... I would lay my case before him, ... he would give heed to me. ... I should be acquitted forever by my judge." [Job 23:3, 4, 6, 7]

That's a bit much for most of us. Whatever our personal relationship with God, angry complaining and demanding is ordinarily not a part of it. In fact, religion seems to teach that submission to God's will, or submission to whatever happens to us, is the appropriate response.

> "We are conditioned," Norman Habel says, "to be meek and mild in the face of God ... to be sweet children rather than mature adults before God." [p. 27]

Job is not meekly submissive, in fact Job takes God so seriously, trusts God so totally, that he must bring to God even this onslaught of resentment and grief and anger. We are listening in on the faithful prayers of a profoundly faithful man, and they are so strong and so honest that they make us uncomfortable.

Anger is a problem for many of us, isn't it? We were taught as children, perhaps, that anger is wrong and hurtful: it is inappropriate to express anger and so it must be wrong to feel anger and so there must be something terribly wrong with me because sometimes I get angry. Some of us have had to be told over and over that it is all right to feel anger, to be angry: that we are responsible for how we express it, but we cannot be responsible for feeling it. We don't have to hit the person with whom we are angry. We don't have to be unkind, or violent, or verbally abusive, just because we're angry. We don't even have to tell him or her that we are angry, but we can't not be angry if we're angry. Some of us have had to work hard to be able to express our anger appropriately. Most of us, I think, find it difficult to hear anger, to listen through anger to the angry person about whom we care deeply.

Sometimes poor people get angry: sometimes unemployment, the inability to find work, or to arrange transportation to work: or to secure safe and clean child care so you can go to work: or the condition of the building, or the fact that your children can't play outside because they might get shot: sometimes all of it boils up and over and anger turns dangerously violent. And those of us who are not caught in the tragic trap of poverty have had to learn that the least helpful thing we can say is, "You have no reason to be angry: your anger is inappropriate." In fact when affluent people tell angry poor people that they shouldn't be angry, the one thing you can be sure of is that angry people get angrier.

Anger, we have learned, is always a part of the experience of loss. Lutheran pastor and theologian Granger Westberg was a pioneer in analyzing and understanding human grief. It was Westberg who coined the phrase "grief work" and who identified the stages of grief through which all people must go at the time of deep personal loss: shock, numbness, sadness, loneliness, panic, guilt and, hostility and anger. "Even the most devout person can feel hostile and resentful ... when we lose someone we become critical of everyone." We look for someone to blame ... oftentimes the doctor for operating or not operating, for arriving too late or for making the wrong diagnosis, or for not caring enough. No matter what he or she did it was wrong. Sometimes we get angry at the minister or the funeral director, or one another, or ourselves. "It's all my fault, I should have done this or that." And often times, beneath it all, at a level so deep in us we cannot always locate it, we are angry at life, its unfairness, and at God. "Oh God, why have you done this to me? Where are you when I need you? Answer me!"

We have had to learn in personal relationships that it is better to express our anger than to repress it, or to aim it toward someone or something else, or turn it on ourselves, or simply sulk in silence. We have had to learn that unexpressed anger can become a very real barrier between us, so we must learn that trust and faith in God who loves us and cares about us allows and invites us to give voice to that deep sense of pain and anger.

This magnificent story assures us that negative emotions, contending with God, arguing with God, are not failures of faith: arguing with God is a way of believing in God, taking God seriously, trusting in God.

In the middle of his own grief, reflecting on the 130th Psalm, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord," Martin Marty wrote:

> "Even the cry from the depths is an affirmation. Why cry if there is no hint or hope of a hearing? Why not mutter to oneself and sulk? The cry comes with no expectations, but it does imply a 'Thou.'" [p. 120]

In Archibald MacLeish's play, *JB*, JB holding onto God, says,

> "God is there too, in the desperation. I do not know why God should strike. But God is what is stricken also." [p. 89]

On that day, a dark Friday afternoon, when all was lost, the process of execution began, his friends gone, his people either weeping or jeering, his life ebbing painfully, Jesus gathered his strength and cried. It was not, I think, meek and submissive. It was at once the most human and the holiest of prayers:

> "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

When I'm that hurt and vulnerable, when life is that unfair and when I cannot repress or deny my anger any longer, I do not want an academic answer to the question of innocent suffering. I do not want an answer at all. I want someone to hear me, my prayer, my pain, my anger.

That's what that man on the cross is about. He is God's answer. He is God's presence.

He is the blessed promise which Job desperately wanted and finally heard ... There is a God of love, who has come to be with us; not so much to provide answers, but to participate in life with us, to be with us through all those experiences which precipitate our questions — a God, not remote, but close, not detached, but a God who shares human suffering and whose love always welcomes us as we are: tired, frightened, lonely, angry.

> "Out of the depths I cry to you, O, Lord. Lord, hear my voice!" [Psalm 130:1,2a]

* * * * *

> O God, we come before you humbly, bringing what faith we have: and also bringing our doubt, our fear, our resentment, our anger. Thank you for hearing us; for being our God; for light in our darkness. Through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.